



DECISION MEMO
TEMPORARY CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES TO ALLOW FOR EQUIPMENT
ACCESS TO THE ARRC RIGHT-OF-WAY FOR ROCK MITIGATION WORK
PORTAGE, ALASKA

GLACIER RANGER DISTRICT, CHUGACH NATIONAL FOREST
U.S. FOREST SERVICE

SUMMARY

After careful consideration of input from external partners, the recommendations of appropriate resource specialists, and the requirements of applicable laws and regulations, it is my decision to approve the temporary construction activities to allow for equipment access to the Alaska Railroad Corporation right-of-way (ROW) to allow for rock mitigation work.

BACKGROUND

Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC) is seeking to reduce rockfall hazards at Mile Post (MP) 52.37 of the Alaska Railroad. To mitigate this ongoing safety issue, ARRC has proposed the drilling and blasting of a large protruding rock mass that is currently resting above the tracks. The overhanging rock face runs parallel to the ARRC mainline track, between railroad tunnels, in the Spencer Glacier area.

The rock hazard is located within the ARRC ROW, in extremely steep, challenging terrain. The only access to the top of the overhanging rock mass is thru National Forest land. The access trail will need to be brushed enough to allow for the passage of tracked drill rigs up the hill. Once equipment reaches the top of the slope, above the project area, it will be necessary to blast two to three “steps” on National Forest lands to walk the equipment down to the ARRC ROW and project area for the mitigation work.

This rock mitigation project is a high priority for the ARRC, as it has become a health and safety issue for passengers, employees and railroad equipment. The window for completion of the work is very small, as it needs to occur after the last passenger car trains runs for the year (September 15th) and before snowfall.

This project, located in the Johnson Pass Inventoried Roadless Area, aligns with the 2020 Chugach Land Management Plan desired conditions related to the IRA.

DECISION

This decision allows for the following actions to mitigate the rock hazards along the ARRC tracks (see attached project map):

- Temporary construction of an access trail thru National Forest lands to allow drill rigs to access the project site. The access trail will run approximately 400 ft across USFS land. Approximately 2,000 square ft of clearing will occur, mostly alder.

- The blasting of rock on National Forest lands to create the necessary two to three “steps” to walk the drill rigs down from National Forest land to the ARRC ROW above the rock overhang. The steps will be approximately 10 ft wide, 50 ft long, 10 ft deep on the high side

My decision includes all design features listed at the end of this document.

ANALYSIS

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures as 36 CFR 220.6(e)(3): *Approval, modification, or continuation of special uses that require less than 20 acres of National Forest Service lands*. This category is applicable because all proposed actions will require less than 20 acres of Forest Service lands.

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species - stipulations added to this authorization to protect native vegetation and species of conservation concern are adequate to address ecology and wildlife concerns.
- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – none present and no effects.
- Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas - none present and no effects
- Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas – the permitted activities will occur within the Johnson Pass inventoried roadless area. However, this project is (1) consistent with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule and (2) will not result in substantial effects to roadless area characteristics.
- Research natural areas – none present and no effects.
- American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – no known sites are present and no effects.
- Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas – no known sites are present within the proposed access route. Historic telegraph poles are present in the project vicinity and will be avoided and protected. Stipulations have been added to this authorization to protect newly discovered, unknown sites.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This project was listed on the Chugach National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) beginning in August 2021, and will remain on the SOPA until after a decision is made.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision is consistent with the 2020 Chugach National Forest Land Management Plan. The project was designed in conformance with all applicable Forest-wide, Kenai Geographic Area, Management Area 4 plan components.



The Forest Service has determined that this project is consistent with the ANILCA Section 810, Subsistence Evaluation and Finding, Endangered Species Act of 1973, National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

This decision is applicable with all other relevant laws and regulations. Additional documentation is in the project record.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision is not subject to the appeal or objection processes. Implementation of this decision may occur immediately. Implementation is expected to begin in September 2021. Work is expected to occur September-October of 2021.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Buffie Stewart at Buffie.Stewart@usda.gov, or by phone at (907-691-5383).

Additional information about this decision also can be found on the Chugach National Forest web page at: www.fs.usda.gov/projects/chugach/landmanagement/projects.

9/23/21

Tim Charnon

Date

District Ranger

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Design Features

1. Soil Stipulations – Holder Shall:

- a. Limit the operation of equipment when ground conditions could result in excessive rutting, displacement, or erosion.
- b. Avoid creating ruts greater than 6 inches deep.
- c. Apply erosion control measures such as native slash, displaced sod, or coconut fiber mats, to disturbed areas with bared soil greater than 100 square feet in size where natural revegetation is inadequate to prevent accelerated erosion before the next growing season.
- d. To minimize the spread of invasive species, seeding or planting shall NOT be implemented without written authorization from the District Ranger or his authorized representative.
- e. If straw materials are used, they must be certified weed free.

2. Blasting Stipulations:

- a. Blasting operations will be restricted or suspended during periods of high rainfall when soils are becoming water saturated. A rain gauge will be installed and maintained near the site by the contractor. Daily precipitation records will be kept by the Contractor during construction period. Halt Blasting operations when any of the following conditions exist:
 - i. Precipitation exceeds 1 inch any 24 hour period.
 - ii. Precipitation exceeds 3 inches in any 96 hour period.
 - iii. Precipitation exceeds 4 inches in any 144 hour period.
 - iv. A landslide occurs within 100 feet of a blast site under any precipitation conditions.

Blasting operations will not resume until precipitation conditions have been less than the above conditions for at least 48 hours, or as directed by the Permit Administrator. In the event of a slide, blasting plans will be evaluated and adjusted to ensure that blasting will not aggravate the existing conditions.

- b. Holder shall notify the Permit Administrator at least 24 hours in advance of conducting blasting activities to allow Forest Dispatch to be notified.

3. Ecology Stipulations:

- a. All heavy equipment used in the project area must be inspected by a qualified Forest Service employee for plant materials, soil, and slugs and slug eggs prior to entry onto Forest Service lands. Bristol Prime Contractors shall contact Chugach National Forest Zone Ecologist, Peter Frank, at (907) 280-9020 to schedule the equipment inspection. If possible, a **one-week** notice is requested prior to mobilizing of equipment. Any questions about cleaning standards can be directed to Peter Frank as well.

- b. The Department of Interior Technical Memorandum No. 86-68220-07-05: [Inspection and Cleaning Manual for Equipment and Vehicles to prevent the Spread of Invasive Species](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5374537.pdf), available at https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5374537.pdf, shall be provided to Holder prior to implementation to provide clear guidance for equipment cleaning.

4. Wildlife Stipulations:

- a. Project site is in bear habitat. During project implementation, Holder shall ensure that human and pet food, garbage, and odorous attractants (fuel) are attended by humans or stored in a bear resistant manner when not being used (bear cans or lockers, containment barrels or inside of vehicles).
- b. Holder shall remove garbage daily from project area.

5. Heritage Stipulations - Holder shall:

- a. Provide a Forest Service approved archeologist to conduct a pre and post work survey of the project area and report findings to the Forest Service archeologist. Based on the pre-work survey findings, the Forest Service archeologist will determine the appropriate survey methodology needed for ground disturbing work.
- b. Avoid, protect and leave in place any known Heritage Sites. Known historic telegraph poles in the area will be avoided and protected with a buffer area.
- c. Ensure that all employees, know that the collection and/or disturbance of artifacts are illegal and not allowed.
- d. Ensure that any new artifacts found are not disturbed and left in place.
- e. Notify the permit administrator of the specific location of new sites or artifacts found by a GPS location and/or a dot on a map.
- f. Stop all work if cultural, archaeological, or historical sites are discovered during construction that may be impacted by the project.

